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ABSTRACT

The relationship between lifelong learning, active citizenship, and neighborhood renewal was explored in the context of the British government's declared intention to address the consequences of poverty through neighborhood renewal, encourage public participation in renewal, and make lifelong learning a central strategy for ensuring future prosperity and economic competitiveness. The cases of four English cities--Derry, Hull, Oxford, and Portsmouth--and the stories of three individuals on the receiving end of neighborhood renewal and educational policies were examined to identify relevant issues and specific implications of British government policies for lifelong learning. The following were among the implications for lifelong learning that emerged: (1) policymakers should shift their focus away from short-term initiatives targeting the socially excluded and serving institutional interests and toward sustained alliances between education workers and local people; (2) lifelong learning must reclaim its social purpose and become a critical resource to local people in ways that help build their self-confidence and activism; (3) lifelong learning practitioners must establish a committed dialogue with residents of deprived neighborhoods to develop the kinds of educational resourcing that makes sense to them and that can begin to make a difference in their lives; and (4) people must be put before systems. Nine discussion questions are included. (MN)

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Rerooting lifelong learning

resourcing neighbourhood renewal

Jane Thompson

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2 policy discussion paper

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Jane Thompson
July 2001

Rerooting lifelong learning

This discussion paper is about the relationship between lifelong learning, active citizenship and neighbourhood renewal. The Government has declared its intention to involve local people actively in the Herculean task of turning around their devastated and deprived communities. In the process, this represents one of the best chances we have to put some of the more ambitious aspirations for lifelong learning into practice. But are we up to the challenge? Do we know what to do? Are we ready to get serious about active citizenship and social inclusion?

1 The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal

In 1997 the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) was given the remit to examine how to develop integrated and sustainable approaches to the problems of the worst housing estates including crime, drugs, unemployment, community breakdown and bad housing. In response to this challenge a report entitled *Bringing Britain Together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal* was published in 1998 analysing the major problems facing deprived neighbourhoods.[1] It recommended that a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal should be developed – a strategy that would be a comprehensive response at national, regional and local levels, to the problems involved. In order to develop the National Strategy, the SEU established 18 Policy Action Teams (PATs) to carry out fieldwork and consultation and to come up with some recommendations.

The PATs separately brought together government officials, local residents, relevant professionals and academics. The team members also visited a number of deprived neighbourhoods and specific initiatives which are attempting to address some of the issues. At the end of its deliberations, each PAT published a report of its findings and recommendations.

In April 2000 a proposed framework for the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal was published drawing on the recommendations made by the various PAT reports.[2] The Government accepted around 85 per cent of all recommendations and a further 10 per cent were accepted subject to some modifications. The Strategy then became the subject of further, widespread consultation.

In January 2001 the Government launched its Action Plan relating to the implementation of the National Strategy.[3] Its main concerns are based on two long-term goals:

- in all the poorest neighbourhoods to have common goals of lower worklessness and crime, and better health, skills, housing and physical environment;
- to narrow the gap on these measures between the most deprived neighbourhoods and the rest of the country.

In pursuit of these goals, the intentions are:

- to introduce a variety of new policies in the areas of worklessness, crime, skills, health, housing and the physical environment, new funding streams and targets;

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1 *Bringing Britain Together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal*, SEU, 1998
2 *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal: a framework for consultation*, SEU, April 2000
3 *A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal: National Strategy Action Plan*, SEU, 2001

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- to promote better local co-ordination and encourage community empowerment by developing Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), developing Neighbourhood Management arrangements and by ensuring that 'communities and residents have a powerful voice in neighbourhood renewal in ways that suit them';[4]
- to provide national and regional support via a national Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) linked to the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR), with regional Neighbourhood Renewal Teams reporting to regional Government Offices.

LSPs will bring together the public, private, voluntary and community sectors with the intention of (i) agreeing local priorities, (ii) preparing a Local Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy (by April 2002), (iii) securing the commitment and agreement of key stakeholders and (iv) collaborating on a concerted plan of action. It is hoped that targeted funding (via the Community Empowerment Fund and Community Chests, administered through regional Government Offices) will assist residents and community groups to participate in the LSPs and run some of their own projects.

LSPs will not be confined to areas in need of neighbourhood renewal, of course. The network is expected to cover the whole country, as a means of creating a community strategy and co-ordinating it through community planning. There is currently a lot of debate about size, whether LSPs should reproduce local authority boundaries or focus on problem estates. Rather inevitably, the debate soon shifts to questions of mechanics and systems at the expense of issues. In this sense LSPs appear to reflect a highly bureaucratic response to devolving power and responsibility to the areas they will cover, in ways that will subsume existing networks and could well stifle energy, diversity and specificity.

Community empowerment

Community empowerment informs much of the rhetoric and many of the aspirations of the Strategy. For example:

> the government is committed to ensuring that communities' needs and priorities are to the fore in neighbourhood renewal and that residents of poor neighbourhoods have the tools to get involved in whatever way they want.[5]

It is recognised that this is a complex process, but should include:

4 *ibid*
5 *ibid*

- outreach – especially to excluded communities, to raise awareness and invite their views;
- facilitation – to help choose community representatives on the LSPs;
- participation in sufficient numbers on the LSPs with opportunities for training and support to be able to do this effectively;
- government intervention if LSPs do not engage with their communities appropriately or take sufficient account of community views.

LSPs will be expected to 'involve communities' in their deliberations, 'welcome involvement' and 'actively seek it out'. A specially-recruited Community Task Force will be established to advise the NRU on how best to involve local people and to respond to communities' needs and priorities. A dedicated Skills and Knowledge Team within the NRU will be responsible for developing learning and capacity-building to assist residents in effective participation.

The recommendations in relation to adult and community-based learning are considerably muted, however. They are predominantly focussed on early years, school provision and extending the Connexions Service aimed at young people. Adults will be prioritised in relation to basic skills and on-line learning through neighbourhood-based learning centres. It is expected that schools, FE colleges, universities, Local Learning Partnerships and the Learning and Skills Councils will become active members of Local Strategic Partnerships.

In this sense, the case for adult and community-based learning still has to be made. Its claim to relevance and its presumptions about engagement with local people will be sorely tested. Adult and community learning could be at the heart of neighbourhood renewal but will need to be very clear about what it has to offer residents and activists who want to get involved in turning around their lives and their communities in ways that just might make a difference. It has been a long time since community education workers have been asked to think about, speak about and act as though learning is connected to the wider purpose of social change or involves social action and political engagement. It is still most common to focus on the technical facilitation of individual learning in relation to accreditation and progression, with the emphasis on process (access, guidance, evaluation, level, and so on) as distinct from purpose. 'It is not so much that means are treated as ends but rather that ends no longer matter'.[6] This focus on individual learning and the preoccupation with technique have meant that more awkward questions about what exactly is being learned, by whom and for what purpose have often been avoided.[7]

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6 Ian Martin (2001) *A note of unfashionable dissent: rediscovering the vocation of adult education in the morass of lifelong learning*, conference paper, University of East London: SCUTREA.

7 Miriam Zukas and Janice Malcolm (2000) 'Pedagogies of lifelong learning: building bridges or building walls?' *Global Colloquium on Lifelong Learning* http://www.open.ac.uk/lifelong-learning/papers/

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2 Tackling poverty

The government's declared intention to tackle some of the worst consequences of poverty via neighbourhood renewal is to be welcomed. The evidence assembled by the various Policy Action Teams to demonstrate the concentration of poverty in specific regions, neighbourhoods and communities is detailed and thorough.[8] It points to the cumulative consequences of economic restructuring and the decline of Britain's manufacturing base. It reminds us that 70 per cent of the country's black and minority ethnic citizens live in the poorest communities. It recognises that policy interventions in the past have frequently been inappropriate and, often, uncommitted. For example, they have been too top-down and too short-term, confirming people's feelings of powerlessness and cynicism. In this sense there is some recognition from government that poverty isn't always people's fault.

The analysis also recognises that the social and spiritual malaise that saps the will and eats away at people's capacity and resilience is understandable in the enduring circumstances of financial hardship, administrative inefficiencies, racism and – in the Thatcher years particularly – a culture of blame and neglect. Understandable but not acceptable. New Labour is now just as keen as the Conservatives once were to disassociate themselves from condoning a dependency culture and from behaviour that is perceived as 'anti-social' when it is identified in areas of multi-deprivation.

Such views were very much in evidence throughout the Labour Government's first term in office. In one of Tony Blair's pre-election speeches, detailing the proposed agenda for the second term,[9] there was not a great deal in the language of opportunity, mobility and responsibility to distinguish what he had to say from Tory rhetoric on the matter. It must have been one of the least socialist speeches of any Labour leader in the history of the Party. And yet there is some evidence in the proposals of a genuine commitment to neighbourhood renewal and community regeneration – going far beyond anything the Conservative Party has in mind – in the interests of the poorest and worst neighbourhoods.

The conflicting messages that come from New Labour about poverty are mixed because they are informed by a major contradiction in Government thinking and policy on the matter. There is some recognition, as we have seen, that the causes of poverty are both structural and a consequence of the social and economic priorities identified by successive governments at the expense of the poor. There is the promise of new policy interventions that will tackle not only the symptoms but also the causes of poverty. But the perceived solutions still rely heavily on modifying and changing the behaviour of individuals and giving them the responsibility for tackling poverty by their own efforts.

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8 *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal: Policy Action Team Audit* 2001
9 8 February 2001

This contradiction is not altogether surprising given New Labour's route in government has been to steer a third way through the polarised positions associated with the old left and the new right. It is a route which implies the best of both worlds: a centre-left state committed to the selective redistribution of some resources, such as targeted tax credits, health care, retraining and regeneration, in order to address the worst extremes of poverty, and a centre-right economy which privileges the drive for self-reliance, economic competitiveness and private profitability above most other considerations.[10] It is from within these competing tensions that all of the Government's social and economic policies flow.

In the run up to the recent election Blair had a lot to say about defeating cynicism and apathy – fed allegedly by the Tory and tabloid press – in relation to the presumed inability of governments to do anything about the real concerns and serious issues that affect people's lives. Determination to end child poverty and to resolve some of the most intransigent manifestations of persistent structural poverty, and the demoralisation which accompanies it, will be a major test of New Labour's second term in office and of the Government's ability to translate its proclaimed idealism and energy into effective outcomes. It will need something other than aspirations and inspiration from on high, however. It will mean the regeneration of all of the major public services in ways that feel noticeably better at the point of use, especially for those whose reliance upon them is greatest and whose experience of them is the worst. It will mean tackling wealth, and challenging vested economic interests, as well as reducing poverty. It will need serious resources. But it will also need a revitalised sense of democratic and social purpose in the consciousness and actions of those who currently help to manage the poor, including adult and community education workers, as well as among residents in those neighbourhoods and communities that have the most to gain from social change.

10 Anthony Giddens (1998) *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity

3 Encouraging public participation

The signs are that New Labour has also become convinced about the need to support 'responsible' democratic renewal and to recognise the importance of active citizenship in those policies concerned to breathe new life into old and intransigent problems. For example, the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal makes it clear that:

> Communities need to be *consulted and listened to* and the most effective interventions are often those in which communities are actively involved in their design and delivery and where possible *in the driving seat*... this applies as much to communities of interest... as it does to geographical communities... it is impossible to turn around a deprived area without the help of local residents... building capacity[11] will mean helping local community leaders in different places *to learn from each other*... (*My emphasis*).[12]

In the same vein – but in the context of the Learning and Skills Councils, Learning Partnerships and adult and community-based learning, and in the encouragement to further education colleges and universities to widen participation in learning – the desire of government for assurance that both providers and the new structures are consulting with and listening to learners[13] is clearly gathering momentum.

In addition, and as a reaction to top-down and short-term approaches to social policy-making, the importance of sustainable development[14] – linked to living and acting sustainably, citizenship education and anti-poverty strategies – now merits a special advisory panel reporting directly to the Deputy Prime Minister. The recognition of sustainable development reflects the concern to resolve some of the causes of non-participation and poverty, as distinct from simply reacting to their consequences. It means identifying a longer timescale in which to effect change than has been usual in the recent past. The increasing importance attached to the principle of sustainable development will, it seems, have an important role to play in delivering not only those agendas outlined in the Urban and Rural White Papers and the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, but also the evolving

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11 Building capacity is this context means strengthening relatively powerless individuals, and in some cases groups, organisations and networks, to increase their ability to contribute to the elimination of poverty. It assumes, of course, that poverty can be eliminated by individual endeavour rather than by changing economic and social priorities in favour of a more equal and socially just society.

12 *op cit*

13 'Listening to learners' has become something of a mantra. It is less clear what we should be listening to or consulting with learners about and what we should do as a consequence of what they tell us.

14 Sustainable development is about equipping people and organisations to live and act sustainably. This involves developing an understanding of the environmental, social and economic issues involved in sustainable development; the opportunity to develop the necessary knowledge, values and skills to put this understanding into practice; and the encouragement to become active citizens and stewards – both locally and globally – in ways that contribute to preserving and enhancing the quality of life.

agenda for lifelong learning set out in *Creating Learning Cultures: Next Steps in Achieving the Learning Age*.[15]

At the same time, increased capital and human resources intended to close the digital divide; to promote ICT and to facilitate access; to put national and local government information on the web; to establish Learndirect and UK Online; and to develop neighbourhood learning centres and the national and community grids for learning are all indications of the importance which is now attached to disseminating information and on-line learning through the medium of communications technology.[16]

Common to all of these policies is an obvious concern about encouraging public participation but also about public opinion. And in a media-conscious age, it is also about who influences and who wins the hearts and minds of civil society.

15 *Sustainable Development Education Panel: Third Annual Report* 2000
16 *PAT Report 15: Information Technology*

4 Lifelong learning

> Lifelong learning was the 1990s' response to, or even defence against, a changing, frightening and unknown technological, economic, political and social environment – it became a concept as slippery and multi-faceted as the environment in which it exists.[17]

Lifelong learning is now a flagship concept. Not only has it more or less replaced the use of post-compulsory education, vocational training, adult education and continuing education to describe adult learning in the UK today, but it also currently enjoys international celebrity as the global discourse within which politicians, economic and professional organisations, non-governmental and inter-governmental agencies and educationalists talk about education. According to John Field and Mal Leicester, 'it recurs in the most surprising variety of contexts...and it appears to command respect among those who are otherwise political enemies'.[18]

One reason why lifelong learning seems to be used with widespread approval is precisely because it glosses over other ways of thinking and speaking about education. Now competing interests and different agendas can shelter together under the same umbrella, providing an illusion of consensus. It allows for turf wars to be suspended and boundaries to be blurred. It represents a victory for 'third way' solutions to politics. As the term gains in popularity, its predominance as a discourse is consolidated.

The secret of lifelong learning is that it means everything. But because it means everything, it is also in danger of meaning nothing. It is possible to attach it – like a kite-mark – to whatever initiative is seeking approval and especially to initiatives that are seeking government funding.

Higher Education, especially, has developed a somewhat fickle relationship with lifelong learning. No self-respecting Russell, research-based, selecting university is without its Centre or Institute for Lifelong Learning. Some already have professors, research projects, and postgraduate professional development programmes – now re-badged as lifelong learning – to reflect the shifts in language and emphasis. Newer universities and higher education institutions, on the other hand, which are more reliant on teaching students than establishing research centres to secure their funding, are likely to be making different strategic use of the terminology via widening participation, on-line learning, the expansion of part-time degrees and franchise deals with FE. But once the responsibility for lifelong learning and widening participation has been shuffled over to a specific department, or to a small number of senior managers, the coast remains remarkably clear for the rest to pursue

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17 Ann Hodgson (2000) *Policies, Politics and the Future of Lifelong Learning*, London: Kogan Page

18 John Field and Mal Leicester (eds) (2000) *Lifelong Learning: Education Across the Lifespan*, London: Routledge Falmer

business as usual.[19] The problem with pragmatism, of course, is that some rather important principles and values associated with education can easily get lost along the way.

So far as the Government is concerned, lifelong learning is clearly regarded as a central strategy for ensuring future prosperity and economic competitiveness, as well as building a more just and inclusive society. When he was Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett was convinced that

> in a knowledge driven economy, the continuous updating of skills and the development of lifelong learning will make the difference between success and failure and between competitiveness and decline...Lifelong learning is essential to sustaining a civilised and cohesive society, in which people can develop as active citizens, where creativity is fostered and communities can be given practical support to overcome generations of disadvantage.[20]

So far the agenda has been most active in those areas relating to labour market training but is full of aspiration and exhortation about lifelong learning's contribution to tackling social exclusion. The preoccupation with economic rather than social outcomes leads to an emphasis on work-related training, participation rates and qualifications rather than on the wider, social purposes of learning. This concentration has inevitably contributed to a somewhat narrow, uncritical, instrumental and economistic understanding of lifelong learning, linked to securing economic competitiveness, at the expense of lifelong learning's other main concerns to do with personal and social development and democratic renewal.

At the same time, national policy documents and institutional practices most frequently associate learning with what goes on in formal educational and training provision, in preference to the kind of learning that people do without the help of institutions, and which they learn from the social dynamics of their lives or from being a part of civil society.[21] This includes the learning from experience that occurs within the privacy of personal and family relationships. But it also includes the intricate web of informal affiliations and associations, as well as more organised clubs, support groups, action groups, interest groups, pressure

19 Jane Thompson ed (2000) *Stretching The Academy: The Politics and Practice of Widening Participation in HE*, Leicester: NIACE

20 *The Learning and Skills Council Prospectus: Learning to Succeed* (1999) London: DfEE

21 For the purposes of this discussion I am using the different definitions of learning noted by Benseman, Findsen and Scott (1996) *The Fourth Sector: Adult and Community Education in New Zealand* Palmerston North: Dunmore Press p58. 'Formal learning refers to any purposefully organised learning process which is substantially controlled by the institution in or through which it is delivered. Non-formal learning refers to any purposefully organised learning process which is intended to serve an identifiable group with specific learning objectives and which is substantially controlled by the participants and/or local community. Informal learning refers to learning processes which are ongoing, pervasive and incidental.'

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groups, (new) social movements, community groups and communities of interest, whereby people attach meaning and significance to shared experiences and common understandings with others, and through which their concerns and issues are articulated and acted on.

The significance of informal learning provides an important corrective to the assumption that learning is little other than a marketable commodity to be dispensed – however flexibly and non-formally – by institutions. Informal learning reminds us of the social agency of learners who are engaged in the dynamic process of living and making sense of complicated lives, in a wide variety of contexts and different circumstances, in most cases without the services of education. Of course, formal and non-formal learning should help to make sense of some of this experience, should test out what is already known, should add new and different knowledge, should help people to use their agency more effectively. But it is a political relationship. As Freire would have said, education should assist people in the practice of freedom rather than conform them to the logic of the present system.

Recognising the relationship between informal and formal learning should remind us to put learners at the heart of learning, as the subjects of learning rather than the objects of educational interventions of one kind or another. We should regard them as variously experienced and knowledgeable social actors, rather than empty vessels. It should encourage us to think more critically about the nature and permeability of the boundaries between institutions and the constituencies they serve, and about what learning and participation actually means, in the context of neighbourhood renewal.

Currently, most of the discussion and policies to do with lifelong learning revolve around the notion of individuals rather than social groups or society as a whole. The Cologne Charter of aims and ambitions for lifelong learning, for example, is very clear that whilst governments should increase their investments in education and training – especially in partnership with business and the private sector – it is 'the responsibility of individuals' to 'develop their own abilities and career' on the basis of 'self generated learning' and by means of 'modern and effective ICT networks' and 'distance learning'.[22]

The Charter addresses itself briefly to 'the needs of the disadvantaged', 'civic responsibility' and 'social cohesion' in ways that assume consensus but without any recognition of the considerable ideological and actual disagreement about the meanings of these terms and the values underpinning their realisation. The 'socially excluded' are labelled collectively but approached individually. The attention is directed to first-rung, self-help and individual responsibilities, all of which under-estimate the impact of structural constraints and overlook the huge disparity in resources available to different social groups – both of which

22 *Cologne Charter: Aims and Ambitions for Lifelong Learning* (1999) G8 Summit, Cologne

affect their capacities to change their circumstances on an individual basis. New Labour has been keen to endorse this view, however. In asking 'how we empower people to cope with change' and 'renew our civic society' Tony Blair, in his recent, pre-election speech, insisted that it was 'the duty' of individuals 'to make the most of the chances they get' and declared 'individual responsibility' to be 'the key to social order'.[23]

There are two dangers in this modernising – and somewhat moralising – tendency, which seems to regard society as an aggregation of individuals, who are invariably referred to individually as solitary rather than social agents. Not only does it relegate discussions about common struggles and common interests to the dustbin of history, but it also translates aspirations for democratic renewal and critical engagement with political processes into issues of self-fulfilment, confidence-building, consumer choice, employability and volunteering.[24] It also appears to 'require' participation in ways that are determined to adjust the socially excluded to the norms and values of white middle-class society – through education, re-training, volunteering, voting – in ways that rely on more than a little coercion and which tolerate few excuses from those who don't want to participate in this way. The danger here is that the blame for social exclusion and poverty is placed on apathetic or wilful non-participating individuals rather than on wider structural and societal trends and influences.

So although lifelong learning has become a convenient shorthand used by policy makers, providers and practitioners to describe the modernising of education and training systems for the future, and has enjoyed increasing prominence in related policy discussions, it remains controversial. It is not a big idea that has so far provoked much enthusiasm among those who are the potential recipients of its intended benefits, especially those who know from their own experience that education has failed to make a qualitative difference to their lives in the past. They will need a lot of persuading that lifelong learning will be any different. The big challenge facing politicians and practitioners in these circumstances is to demonstrate the relevance and commitment of lifelong learning to tackling the urgent problems and real concerns of people living in the kinds of circumstances in poor and run-down neighbourhoods that would defeat the most courageous of us.

23 8 February 2001

24 See for example David Blunkett, From Strength to Strength: rebuilding the community through voluntary action, speech to the Annual Conference of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 7 February 2001

5 A tale of four cities

In the spirit of relating ideas to practice I will begin with a few illustrations. They do not provide anything like a comprehensive review of what is at stake in different and contradictory contexts – particularly in relation to race – but they might help us to ground some of this argument in concrete examples. Rather than include my own analysis, which can be read in the original accounts, I shall highlight some of the issues revealed by the illustrations. Towards the end of the paper I shall include some contributions to the discussion by learners and activists and add some related commentaries on current thinking and ideas. I will finish with some questions for discussion.

5.1 Derry[25]

Centres like the Rosemount Resources Centre in Derry are not unusual in Northern Ireland and illustrate what can happen when the local state – and government – loses the confidence of local people and is unable – or unwilling – to deliver the kinds of services and supports they need to survive. They take matters into their own hands. As well as providing a safe and friendly place to meet for a range of different groups, the Centre is also a place to get welfare advice and to formulate action on personal and local issues including jobs, drugs, alcohol abuse, vandalism and domestic violence. It is a place to make contact with neighbours facing similar issues, in an effort to find individual and common solutions. Increasing enthusiasm and a growing membership has stepped up the demand for education.

In general Centres like Rosemount confront three main problems. They have to establish democratic structures and ways of working that are capable of reconciling conflicting interests and internal differences. Most have originated in the religious and physical circumstances of separatist communities but the majority now operate across the sectarian divide. As they become more established, they need to chart a skilful course between the requirements of those who give them money, their responsibilities to the communities they serve, and their declared intention to retain their autonomy. Powerful external forces inevitably have an interest in trying to control them. At different times central and local government, churches, quangos, political parties, and paramilitaries have all exercised a pervasive and at times threatening surveillance. Since funding has become more lucrative – via the European Social Fund and Peace and Reconciliation money – educational providers and NGOs

25 Jane Thompson, 'Life Politics and Popular Learning' (2000) in Field and Leicester, *op cit* London: Routledge Falmer

have also become more entrepreneurial about partnership agreements. It has to be said, however, that pragmatic co-operation between agencies and organistions with different degrees of status and power – sometimes with objectives relating to organisational agendas that are not always fully transparent – are not automatically a good thing for community organisations concerned about advancing the interests of their members and maintaining their autonomy.

The third problem facing community centres is the problem of funding. Sustaining development and survival depends on securing project money and core funding from sources that keep different groups in competition with each other for scarce resources. The bidding culture and the promotion by government of competitive self-help can act to frustrate attempts to build solidarity across disparate communities which just might get organised in more united – and potentially more sustainable – ways.

What is interesting in these circumstances – and very inspiring – about the Rosemount Centre is the way in which its members have responded 'from below' to the perception of problems and solutions in ways that are transformational in character. In my brief association with the Centre I have seen the increasing influence of women in decision-making structures and participatory roles, which has had the effect of increasing women's visibility in the community and begun to shift the balance of power in gender relations. I have seen a prominent local educational figure – with something of an international reputation in community development – having his entrée into the Centre terminated once it became clear that he was more interested in acquiring control of development money raised by the Centre for educational projects – to enhance his own reputation and career prospects in the academic organisation which employed him – rather than become a genuine ally and resource for those seeking knowledge and educational qualifications. I have also been present at a meeting of community and cross-border representatives, reflecting the entire spectrum of working class political organisations in Northern Ireland. There were groups with paramilitary connections and with long and painful histories of mutual antagonism and hostility which remain unresolved, at a time when professional politicians trying to set up a power-sharing Assembly in Northern Ireland were in deadlock. The purpose of the meeting was to put political differences on one side and to establish an inclusive network to advance the common interests of impoverished communities – to access funds from the private sector, to create jobs, and to build a learning framework capable of delivering training in ICT, qualifications in community development, and educational opportunities tailored to the needs and interests of local people. And all this in the context of ideas and energy coming directly 'from below', based on experience and local knowledge, with very little 'professional' imput, and totally outside the remit and control of 'official' institutions. In fact, very nearly the kind of partnership any government would love to take credit for and try to monitor in terms

of 'targets', 'standards' and 'skills', but which is rooted in dissenting politics, emancipatory learning and local control in ways that do not fit easily into the ideology of 'helping the disadvantaged' or functional training for labour market flexibility.

The development of the Rosemount Resource Centre illustrates a number of issues which those concerned with adult education should want to have recognised in any discussions about the way forward for lifelong learning. top-down solutions, framed within a glib consensus about the kinds of skills governments and employers think their citizens should have in the future, do not pay sufficient attention to where different communities of people are coming from and what their perceptions of the issues might be. Debates about active citizenship, democratic renewal and local participation are all part of the lifeworld in which ordinary people already have lots of experiential knowledge and a whole range of different skills which they use to survive, negotiate and challenge the circumstances in which they find themselves. For the last 30 years – at least – the working class people of Rosemount have negotiated class politics, poverty, exploited labour in the local factories and stereotypical gender relations on the home front. Their lives have also been inextricably tied up in 'the troubles' in ways that have left no-one untouched by the politics of poverty, sectarianism, imperialism and war. These are the starting points from which their interests have to be understood and their educational needs considered.

In the women's group particularly, becoming enthusiastic and serious about education – against all the odds – has been inspired by mutual and collective support. This is a group in which differences are negotiated and 'doing things together' has achieved the kinds of results that individuals could not achieve on their own. Individuals are making individual changes to their lives, but in the context of everyday life, learning and change have to be conducted within – as well as against – the very real contraints of structure. Changes to 'the structures' will only come about if people act collectively on their own realities to recognise, challenge and begin to change the structural constraints which keep them in their place.

5.2 Hull[26]

The journey to my parents' house takes me through peripheral estates in which the rate of unemployment is well above the national average. I stop to buy some bread and milk in a supermarket that charges the poor more for their groceries than it charges shoppers in more affluent areas, banking on the absence of any competition, and the difficulties and costs of transport, to deliver a captive audience. The rest of the shops are boarded up. Even the pub looks like Alcatraz. A brave attempt at a Drop-In Centre for the unemployed struggles behind window bars and oversized padlocks. I know the women at the checkout well, from somewhere deep inside myself, watching a whole week's shopping slide past along the counter, bought to feed a family of five, and costing less than I would spend on a meal for two at my favourite Oxford Bistro. If I had the nerve, I would like to join in the checkout conversation, but I do not want to give offence. I wonder whether the women notice my dislocation from this landscape – in my hesitation, my rich clothes, the way I no longer fit the territory as I once did – in the way that most of us can read the subtleties of class within minutes of being introduced. I know all too well the tell-tale signs that help to explain the sometimes look of resignation in their eyes. Women who are getting on with business as best they can, looking more tired and older than they really are. Poorly dressed in styles that are chosen for cheapness and conformity, with part-time jobs as cleaners, care assistants, casual workers on the twilight shift. Used to making ends meet with not enough money. Buying tins of beans and cornflakes and potatoes. Stretching the stew. Managing kids alone, managing their men, maybe. Strong women with intelligence and dignity. Always ready for a laugh, some gossip, repeated disappointment. Hassling the Council, their landlords, the Social, the loan sharks. The kind of women that keep localities like this intact – without much recognition and usually a hostile press.

I pay for the milk and bread and get back into my car – rooted in the memories, the sentiments and feelings of belonging, which were born in blood, drawn from the resources of generations who lived this life before me, and from which education, feminism, a decent job has been my liberation.

26 Jane Thompson (2000) 'Returning to the Northern City' in *Reclaiming Common Purpose*, Thompson, Shaw and Bane (eds), Leicester: NIACE

5.3 Oxford[27]

Men and women experience poverty in different ways. I will use Blackbird Leys in Oxford as an example. The car industry once relied upon the Blackbird Leys Estate to supply black and white labour for an industry closely associated with masculinity. Cars were made predominantly by men, for men, and throughout much of the twentieth century were closely identified, in the popular psyche, with modernity, mass production, conspicuous consumption and mobility. As the numbers of men in the Oxford works declined – from 30,000 to less than 5,000 in 20 years – the prosperity of the Blackbird Leys Estate was devastated. Not only the livelihoods of families dependent on the car works for income, but also political and trade union affiliation, employment prospects and the identity of working class men were all but extinguished. Although lads were effectively prevented from making cars, it did not stop them from stealing them. This is how Beatrix Campbell describes the activities of young men from the Blackbird Leys Estate in Oxford during the summer of 1991:

'The night boys defied the definition of a passive underclass: these young men weren't *under* anyone. Economically they were spare, surplus, personally they were dependent on someone else for their upkeep, usually their mothers; socially they were fugitives, whose lawlessness kept them inside and yet outside their own community. They had no jobs, no incomes, no property, no cars, no responsibilities. But that is not to say that they weren't busy, with their "own business". And what they did have was a reputation. In many ways they were the "invisibles", their reputation derived nonetheless from being seen, from performing. Their vanity showed their valour. They planned, primed and timed a local drama that took place nightly in a small square.'[28]

According to Campbell, escalating car crime on the estate was about 'the relationship between young men and power, machinery, speed and transcendence'. Through theft, and through the spectacle and danger of joyriding, young men reconstructed a type of masculine identity for themselves which their fathers had previously created in the workplace, but which economic decline and global changes in the location of car production had destroyed.

Meanwhile women went about their business. Partly in defence of their men, partly in defence of their communities. The ease and frequency with which the bad behaviour of boys gets blamed on mothers leaves women with responsibility

27 Jane Thompson (2000) *Women Class and Education*, London: Routledge
28 Beatrix Campbell (1993) *Goliath: Britain's Dangerous Places*, London: Methuen

for the kinds of masculinity over which they have never had much control. It is the kind promoted by the powerful men in their sons' lives – other lads, their fathers, the police, the politicians, prison officers and the judiciary. Without social systems offering much support, or an alternative analysis, working class women continue to manage life for their men as they have always done. A lawyer interviewed by Campbell in *Goliath* explains the relationship between men and women in pauperised neighbourhoods like this:

'When the men get into trouble, or when their wives want them out, it is their wives and mothers who make the arrangements. The men won't go to their solicitors, they won't liaise with the housing department, they won't liaise with their kids' schools. It's the women who make the appointments, it's the women who call to cancel the men's appointments, it's the women who make the apologies. We have women ringing up saying the men want to know what's happening to their case, or when he's due in court. What is absolutely astonishing about these tough men is that they have to have their slippers under some woman's bed. The men cannot make out on their own. The reality is that children in this community do not grow up seeing men do any of the coping, caring or standing on their own two feet.'[29]

The different responses to poverty and unemployment are made manifest in the different ways in which some men and some women deal with their distress. The criminal response of masculinity is typically exclusive, secretive, coercive and destructive. Its rewards are the appropriation of material provisions, commodities and identity. The challenge which it makes is not to the economic or state systems which created the circumstances and crisis which men experience, but to the communities in which they live, and frequently to the women with whom they live. According to Campbell, 'the criminal fraternity is nothing if not about the means by which coteries of men constitute their dominance' as patriarchy has always sought to do. Women, on the other hand, respond to poverty and its related distress through self-help networks that are sustained by voluntary action and support groups. More people join self-help groups than join political parties and the majority of them are women.[30] Women's ways of working are more likely to be open, expansive, egalitarian and incipiently democratic.[31] As such they challenge the systems which have bearing upon local and domestic life. Whilst crime and coercion is sustained by men, solidarity and self-help is sustained by women. The contrast – and the implications – are enormous.

29 *ibid*
30 Anthony Giddens, (1994) *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics*, Cambridge: Polity
31 Cynthia Cockburn (1998) *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*, London: Zed

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5.4 Portsmouth[32]

As the children of the Paulsgrove Estate in Portsmouth go back to school, and their teachers ask them what they did during their summer holidays, they will be able to say, they joined the vigilantes. They will have learned that sometimes men want to have sex with young children in ways that must have set them thinking about what kind of 'sex' this could possibly be. They will have learned to paint banners saying 'kill the pervs' and 'get them out'. They will have watched their mothers – and a few of their fathers – baying for blood. They will have learned to sing the old sixties battle song from older – less contradictory – protests…'we shall not, we shall not be moved…' as they too sat down in the road. They will have learned to spell paedophile.

Local working class people – and their children – taking to the streets to express their views, to speak with confidence to the media and to register their anger, does not happen very often. In debates about political apathy, the democratic deficit and neighbourhood renewal, the prospect of locally-led and locally-owned interventions to resist unpopular state policies, and to argue for changes in the law, would seem to be the answer to every earnest capacity builder's and community regenerator's prayer.

Except that the protests had all the characteristics of a witch-hunt. They depended on cheap media provocation. They were fuelled by contagious levels of emotion. They operated on hearsay and suspicion. They frightened other residents – who felt unable to disagree with the action being taken, for fear of being associated with paedophilia. They appear to have harassed and terrified the wrong men, forcing some innocent families – including children – to flee, and at least one named paedophile to commit suicide.

It was not long, of course, before the women themselves came in for public condemnation. As one commentator put it, 'If this is the alternative, I'd rather live next door to a paedophile'. If these had been mothers with children who go to public school, they would have been more easily recognised as concerned parents. If they didn't have tattoos, pale faces, peroxide hair – if they were not so obviously working class – they would never have been called a mob.

In the interviews with the press, these strong, articulate women talked wildly of castration, hanging and the putting down of 'animals'. Whilst the intemperance of their language might well have made the chattering classes wince, no one who listened to them could be in any doubt that they were frightened for their children's safety, that they resented their estate being used as a dumping ground for paedophiles, and that something else was also going on.

It was also pretty obvious that the

32 Jane Thompson, (2000) 'When Active Citizenship becomes Mob Rule', in *Adults Learning*, September

News of the World – in pursuit of profit – could know more about how to galvanise the 'active citizenship' of working class people on impoverished estates than any number of community development workers and adult educators with their mapping exercises, needs analyses and drop-in taster sessions.

If nothing else, the activities of the Paulsgrove vigilantes should remind us that the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal and the attention of the Social Exclusion Unit, which focuses on those living in the worst estates, needs a more nuanced analysis of what constitutes social exclusion and deprivation – especially in relation to the kinds of social and educational intervention that is most likely to be appropriate.

These residents are not hapless victims who need to be rescued by better information and guidance services, mentoring schemes and community champions, designed to lead them gratefully towards social inclusion. Their standpoints cannot be easily normalised according to middle class values via training for employment or by participating in 'worthwhile' activities like voting or family learning. They do not appear to lack confidence or need their capacity for leadership developing.

These are – women especially – people who are quite capable of making their presence felt when they want to. Indeed they do it all the time. Here – as elsewhere – women's activism comes out of their radicalism in the domestic sphere, and especially in relation to housing, health and children. Fighting Local Authorities about tenants' issues; campaigning for play facilities; tackling vandalism, drugs and drug-dealing; targeting women's health care, isolation and depression – all provide examples of militant self-help activities undertaken by women at the crisis point where class and sexual oppression meet.[33] Taking to the streets to remove paedophiles from their estate is part of this same tradition, carried through in ways that have left those with authority and conventional wisdom – the police, the local MP, the Home Office minister – both shocked by the women's volatile enthusiasm for rough justice, and quite unable to stop them in their tracks. As elsewhere, the Paulsgrove protests reveal the kind of activism which is best seen as defiance – however uncomfortable – against traditional (and middle class) constructions of femininity, participation, respectability and subordination.

So far as adult learning is concerned, the evidence of Paulsgrove speaks of agency and outrage on the part of the protesters – but also of ignorance. It reveals the fine line between people power and 'mob rule'. Education should not seek to cancel outrage but it can confront ignorance. If educators are not prepared to struggle alongside learners to create useful and democratic knowledge; based on reason and emotion; shaped in the context of ethical and political considerations; which link personal troubles to public issues, the local to the

33 Jane Thompson (2000) *Women Class and Education*, London: Routledge

bigger picture; and in which every one of us has something to learn and something to teach – then the field is left clear for the *News of the World* and their like to do their worst.

The residents and children of deprived estates deserve better than mob rule and rough justice. Gender violence sustained by power and secrecy will not be dented by creating scapegoats. Only when those with the least power – women and children – regain confidence in those who are supposed to love them and help them to manage their affairs: only when they have access to gender equality, knowledge, critical thinking and proper influence – will they be able to settle what they see as gross injustice in ways that do not do injustice to themselves or to others in the process.

6 Issues raised

These illustrations reveal a number of relevant issues, including:

- more people currently join self-help groups, community groups, voluntary organisations and action groups than political parties – which necessitates a broader definition of what constitutes political participation

- social class differences are alive and well – despite current political reluctance to use the terminology of class.

- women are particularly active in community groups and are good at involving others

- economic restructuring is not only about the loss of men's traditional jobs – it has implications for ideas about what constitutes masculinity and identity

- women's experience of poverty frequently involves 'managing' men whose 'crisis of masculinity' – expressed in menacing, criminal and violent activities – is often directed at the women in their lives and fellow residents

- gender, class and cultural differences – whilst obvious to all concerned – are difficult to negotiate and are complicated by issues of power

- there are inequalities of power within communities as well as between communities

- losing confidence and trust in the local state and service providers often persuades local people to take matters into their own hands – the consequences of which can be either impressive or appalling

- scapegoating minorities (e.g. paedophiles, unruly working class women, asylum seekers, refugees, minority ethnic groups, and so on) and inciting moral panic are likely to have the most devastating consequences – in terms of conflicts and tensions between residents – in run-down communities where people are living 'close to the edge'.

These illustrations also reveal specific implications for lifelong learning:

- conventional adult learning interventions may seem out of touch: people can learn important lessons about organising themselves, building their capacity, collaborating with others and resolving conflicts from experience and through informal learning

- it is important not to ignore people's skills and de-value their resilience with professional assumptions which imply they are deficient

- if lifelong learning has anything real and relevant to offer deprived neighbourhoods, it must know where people are coming from and respond to what they say they need to know – this means becoming a resource to local people rather than a supplier of marketable commodities

- ICT can connect different communities and support community learning opportunities as well as generate training and employment – but people need to see how it can help them in real and concrete ways

- changes in the lives of people in impoverished neighbourhoods will be more sustainable when they are undertaken together with others rather than individually

- bottom-up initiatives are always in danger of incorporation by more powerful institutions/agencies/interests.

7 Listening to learners

What is usually missing from policy discussions like this one, of course, about lifelong learning, active citizenship and neighbourhood renewal, is the contributions of learners, activists and residents. Second-hand anecdotal evidence abounds. Sometimes edited snippets from interviews and questionnaires give a flavour of what people might have said if they were given more time and space to elaborate in ways that are not circumscribed by the interviewer's schedule. But it is rare to be asked, as providers and practitioners, to think about what it is we think we have to offer in the light of contributions made by those on the receiving end of our ideas and policies. I include here three such contributions. These accounts do not constitute a universal or definitive analysis of what counts as lived experience, or how education relates to what people need to know in deprived neighbourhoods and communities. But they contribute immediacy and authentic knowledge derived from the experience of living in such contexts. They also reveal how variously and frequently official claims made about lifelong learning, related to economic progress, individual mobility, active citizenship and neighbourhood renewal – indeed, most of the familiar and tendentious vision statements of the age – do not always work in quite the way that educationalists, politicians and social commentators like to imagine.

7.1 Gaynor

My sister lives on an awful council estate where I was brought up before I went into care. She is off the danger list for a bit. She is a complex woman and having the five kids means she has lived her life on her wits. She sees having the children as her job since the various fathers have abandoned all responsibility. I could scream with anguish about the situation. But the kids are her guaranteed income, she feels she can do little else other than care for them. To ease the burden whilst she was fighting the cancer I said I'd foster two or three of them, adopt them even, although I'm on my own now as well so I would never be allowed to do it legally. But I didn't realise how much this would deplete her welfare benefits. So we struggle on. Her health's improving and we laugh a lot. Her memory of our childhood is more romanticised than mine. She can't admit to a lot of what went on. I've managed to get three out of the five kids to go to school fairly regularly. Although it's not what you would call a liberating experience. Schools round here have their work cut out. I think the teachers are quite relieved when some of the kids don't turn up. I try to inspire them a bit and I don't take any shit. They know they have to get up at dawn to get one over on me. But it's a hard way of living. And I do believe I had slipped a bit too far off the factory road to recognise the realities for what they are. Maybe it's because I had grown to love college and

my books so much that it became more comfortable being up my own arse for a while.

Anyway, I've got involved in local community stuff since coming back. It's mostly women trying to hold this place together. Bea Campbell is right. You know what she means in a place like this – drugs, prostitution, racial attacks, murder. Trying to work through social action with people on the receiving end of no jobs, no hope, and the break down of community, isn't pretty. We had five murders in this square mile in the last nine months. Crack dealers at the root of it. Bloody sheep ticks! Two unions have their regional offices on the High Street but I'm afraid the more I see of them, the less I want to go back to all of that. Still the same tossers, keeping things for themselves. Still crap when it comes to women's issues. The local Labour Party want me to run for the Council – only because they think I can win the seat. I've got all the right Irish Catholic family credentials I suppose but I don't think that speaking out for a tolerance zone for working women on the streets to keep them safer is quite the brand of community activism the local Catholic mafia are looking for. Thanks for your letter. It put a smile on my face for the rest of the day. I am moving to another flat, within spitting distance of the river. They say it's lovely at night – to see the ships and the city across the water all lit up…

7.2 Tommy

Our centre is in an area of multi deprivation, rating 13th in Northern Ireland's poverty index. Localised unemployment figures in pockets reach as high as 70%. In common with other areas of the city it has suffered from the troubles with deaths, army raids, shootings and bombings. Many families have had members imprisoned and the local police barracks at one time had the dubious distinction of being the most attacked in Northern Ireland by rockets, grenades, bombs and gunfire.

Our centre was formed by a group of local people when a bombed building collapsed almost killing a child at play. The group set about examining the needs of the local area. We squatted in an old portacabin belonging to the City Council and soon established a small service providing welfare rights advice, painting and decorating, and a home visiting service for the elderly and people with disabilities. We received some funding for jobs via the Action for Community Employment (ACE) scheme and over the next few years we developed new projects and were providing jobs for over 30 people. Five years ago we decided to review our strategy and identified five major concerns.

- The centre must retain its independence and its community base
- We had to generate income outside of grant aid

- We had to organise ourselves to provide a professional service and cope with change
- We had to acquire better premises
- We had to acquire the skills necessary for future development.

Today the centre owns its own building and has three other locations in Derry and one in Donegal. Our projects now include a playgroup and an after-school centre, a women's group, an elderly men's group, a drugs and alcohol project, an overseas Romanian relief project, an extensive cross-border carer's project (including respite care) and a comprehensive IT project (including hardware sales, network installation, internet services and training). The centre is also part of the community consortium delivering the Worktrack programme and the New Deal.

The management committee of our centre comes from the local area and all are voluntary. All members of the management committee and centre staff are required to be active in at least one of the constituent projects. In order to provide better resources we have negotiated the purchase of the building from the Department of Education and bought it with a private mortgage. We acquired funding for all the centre's equipment and can now provide high quality administrative support to meet the requirements of funding agencies and statutory bodies. In order to become more independent we regularly examine the sustainability of each project. The playgroup and the after-school project now generate sufficient income through small charges to continue with very little grant aid and expect to be totally self-sustaining in the very near future. We have also developed two new projects recently, arising out of local needs, which have the potential to generate profit. The first is COM CUBED (Community Computerised Communication) and the second is ASCET (Agency for Social, Cultural and Educational Tourism). COM CUBED has opened a retail shop and training suite and trades in the market as a comprehensive computer company. ASCET currently hosts visiting groups from German trades unions and is seeking to expand its contacts with other groups and countries.

We have also recognised the need to acquire new skills, especially in relation to social and personal development and education. However we feel strongly that our educational needs should be dictated by us and that as an organisation we should, as far as possible, have an input in design, delivery and evaluation. In this way we have developed agreements with the University of Ulster and Ruskin College to run community studies and women's studies programmes in our centre. For core skills we have made use of COM CUBED and had it registered with RSA and ECDL. We are currently seeking registration for the delivery of NVQs. All of these developments have enabled us to 'professionalise' whilst keeping the process firmly within our own control. It has also led us to develop and begin to design a plan for delivering community education ourselves, tailored to the needs of different groups in our community.

The last piece of the jigsaw has to do with influencing the decision makers. There are many ways to do this, for

example publicity, lobbying politicians on an individual basis, running conferences, and so on. But in Northern Ireland these tactics often fall on stony ground. The wider political arena is concentrated on constitutional issues and it is difficult to get our politicians even to shake hands, let alone agree on a united community policy. In our view, if the community sector is to make itself heard, it is necessary to work through networks of different groups united in common purpose. Given the history of violence and mistrust here, this is a big task. Our solution has come through focussing on the current buzz words sustainability, information technology, job creation, cross-community/cross-border partnerships, joined-up thinking, employability and others. Community groups need all of these and more if they are to survive and prosper. We see IT as the key. It impacts on all the others. On its own it can be developed as a useful tool but it also has the potential to facilitate every other kind of development as well. We currently have a network of 17 community organisations on board from Derry, Belfast, the six counties and the border areas, including all shades of political opinion. We are making sure that each organisation has the same resources in terms of hardware, skills and training programmes but also retains its independence. Already some groups are developing joint project work. The combined collaboration of the network is formidable when it comes to accessing resources and in marketing our services. Now we can call on support from all political parties and both parts of Ireland. The IT infrastructure provides training, creates jobs and is allowing us to develop an infrastructure to deliver education to every area. Most important, the united voice of the network has an increasing influence in relation to the policy makers.

We know that community groups have often been viewed by statutory bodies as irritants but there is now a climate in which government is encouraging community groups to get involved in neighbourhood renewal. This is what we were doing already, without the permission of government. If government is serious about engaging the community sector as a partner in combating social exclusion and encouraging participative democracy, then we welcome the challenge. However, partnership means equality not usury. The community sector should not allow itself to be turned on and off like a tap. In a true partnership criticism is healthy and should be taken seriously. Government has nothing to fear from criticism. No policy or programme is perfect. If flaws or omissions are identified at grass roots level they should be rectified not justified. We have nothing to fear either from interfacing with government, so long as we retain our right to be critical, to remain independent and to maintain our loyalty to our communities as a matter of principle. To this end I would like to see our sector funded directly as partners in the social economy.

7.3 Lindsey

This incident challenged my assumption that women are accepted as community leaders and that the role women take within their communities is respected and has authority. In order to tell my story I will outline the context which led to the incident.

A group of local women living in a local authority housing estate became concerned with the behaviour of a group of young men in the neighbourhood. The group of women concerned included myself. We had all lived our lives relatively peacefully. We have a high youth population on our estate and are considered a 'disadvantaged community'.

A group of young men took over the estate for roughly six-seven months. This take-over was the result of anti-social behaviour which involved drinking, drug dealing, blatant sexual activity, vandalism, burglary, assault, intimidation, bullying and retaliation for talking to the authorities. Because of its violent undertones it was difficult to challenge. One woman who did stand up to the group was kicked, threatened and stalked on her way to the women's group. Her son had to escort her around the community for fear of being attacked. She slept with a baseball bat in her bed, when she slept at all, because of the threats to her and her family.

One night, very late, we saw the blue flashing lights through the curtains as we watched television. The blue flashing lights were a regular feature of life on the estate. This particular night a house had been stoned. All the windows in the front of the house were broken and a car destroyed. The people living in the house were taken to hospital with injuries and shock. We all knew who was responsible and yet none of us was prepared to talk. We knew that we would meet with the same fate, or worse, for talking.

These were not once-off events but became part of an on-going lifestyle we found ourselves accommodating. We decided to take action by meeting with the police superintendent. We had had enough of pulling our children off the streets, living as virtual prisoners in our homes and fearing that the men in the community would take a vigilante stance and retaliate themselves. The night and the dark took on a sinister life of its own. We lived as if we were ducking snipers in a war zone.

The decision to go to the police was a difficult one to make. Not everyone agreed it was the right course of action. Some were afraid of the repercussions at a personal level. Enough women felt strong enough and angry enough to confront the issue and deal with the repercussions. The sense of solidarity in that feeling was strong; it helped focus the women on the task in hand.

On the night we decided to meet the police superintendent, we had to smuggle women out of the estate. I drove my car to a pick-up point where three women jumped in. If the young men suspected us of going, we knew there would be retaliation.

We prepared ourselves for the meeting

with the superintendent, working out strategies, deciding who would say what. The County Housing Officer, Social Worker and Community Liaison Officer, as well as the Community Development Worker with the Health Board also attended the meeting. They were all men. Men represented the statutory agencies while we women represented the community.

Right away the police superintendent was defensive. He did not introduce anyone in the room. We felt his lack of respect showed in his lack of preparation for the meeting. His tone was not of caring. His air of superiority had the effect of silencing and degrading us. This was hard to understand as we had come as concerned community mothers. However we were told that, as mothers, we were responsible for the youths' behaviour and that our own behaviour was not much better. We were told about the numbers of drunken adults roaming the city streets on any given weekend. We were asked, 'Where are your men? We expect your men to protect us when we go up there'. We were also threatened with a 'go slow' order for our estate if we contacted or lobbied our local politicians.

The meeting went from bad to worse. Our practice sessions about strategies were no use. Our anger took over as we shouted at the superintendent. I felt we had let ourselves down. The emotions of that night still stop my breath and make me shake. The men in that room did not recognise our fears and concerns. They were turned against us, and becoming silenced, we left.

Being a community worker myself in a small town has become an identity for me, an identity that I enjoy. I feel respected and pride myself on my professionalism within this role. I have been a community worker with both voluntary and statutory agencies. I chair and sit on numerous partnership structures. I experience power and I often in powerful positions. I can negotiate, mediate, persuade and facilitate because these are skills I have developed in this role. But I am also a woman living in one of the many state-subsidised ghettos of the present time. Women living in peripheral communities in peripheral roles are invisible.

Most of the women involved in the meeting with the police superintendent have now opted out of the community development process. Community groups in other locations have noted the lack of attendance at cross-community meetings from this estate. Four of them have put their houses on the market to be sold. Two women resigned from the management committee. One woman does not come outside her door. The women's group has dwindled down to three or four. Two women have lost their interest in getting a community resource centre built. There is nobody showing up for meetings to begin discussions for a family resource centre.

The young that disrupted life on our estate are all in prison now but they have left their legacy. Now younger children continue with the drinking, drug taking, loud music and the shouting of abuses. This is not quite as threatening, because they are younger, and has become part of the normal rhythm and routine of daily life.

My own anger and tears still surface easily. The loss of the enthusiasm of the

women is a loss to humanity. As I write this now it strikes me that women who respond to community needs and women's needs, within the confine of disadvantage, often do so out of genuine caring about community. Their activism is often fuelled by anger. The anger builds at meetings like the meeting with the police and those other officials in which power is in play. It is an anger that is heightened by the distortions presented about women's lives. It is an anger born of being silenced, an anger born of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of divisions and stereotyping. It is also an anger born of betrayal, of being subsumed and of invisibility. This anger is in response to sexist and class-related attitudes, and the actions that arise out of them, which keep women submerged.

8 Related commentaries

In Hannah Arendt's wonderful and increasingly relevant study of the state of modern humanity, written in 1958, she asks us quite simply 'to think about what we are doing'.[34] She adds, with cautionary insight, that 'if it should turn out to be true that knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and thought have parted company for good, then we would indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how...no matter how murderous it is'. I include here some of my thinking about the politics and practice of what we are doing and invite you to do the same.

8.1 Joined-up thinking not stitched-up thinking

The notion of joined-up thinking invites politicians, policy makers, providers and practitioners to think outside their boxes. I hope it also implies thinking outside of their prejudices and/or received wisdom.

The 18 Policy Action Teams deployed by the Social Exclusion Unit to inform the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal is a good example of encouraging different government departments to contribute to the process of social analysis and recommendations about neighbourhood deprivation and poverty. One of the consequences of this joined-up approach at local level is that Local Strategic Partnerships, composed of public, private, voluntary and community sector representatives, will be encouraged to collaborate in developing renewal strategies and action plans for deprived and poor neighbourhoods in ways that will address some of the problems and weaknesses of local service delivery in the past. The model is similar to that which informs Local Learning Partnerships and the work of Local Learning and Skills Councils. The intention is that collaboration will be more effective than competition. In practice, however, genuine collaboration remains an aspiration which is easier to encourage than to achieve, particularly since the positioning of private sector representatives in all of these arrangements will ensure that market considerations are kept high on the agenda.

Over 20 years of market economics in the UK – promoted by both Conservative and Labour governments – has created a market-led model for the delivery of education and other services.[35] In the case of education, this means that providers have been encouraged to compete with each other for learners, and learners have been encouraged to shop around to find the best deal. Notions of customer satisfaction and consumer choice have done a great deal to encourage the marketing, packaging, delivery and best value of education on the one hand, and instrumental attitudes to learning and value for money on the other. Whilst

34 Hannah Arendt (Second Edition 1998) *The Human Condition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press p 3, 5.

35 Andy Green (2000) 'Lifelong learning and the Learning Society: Different European Models of Organisation' in *Policies, Politics and the Future*, Ann Hodgson (ed), London: Kogan Page

Labour has sought to encourage greater collaboration in this respect, the ensuing 'deals' – in the context of a market-economy – are more likely to be based on self-interest and securing resources, than any necessary recognition of shared ideals and common purpose.

Although partnerships are now in vogue, they are not always undertaken on the basis of mutual attraction, a meeting of minds or a sense of solidarity. They work best when they are 'rooted in a community (not necessarily geographical), have a broad understanding of adult learning, take the time to understand their own rationale... and embody an urgency – here are our needs, our problems to be solved'.[36] But the continuing focus on government directives and pragmatic initiatives, flexibility of provision, new markets, projects, targets, indicators and outcomes, for example, all encourage the pursuit of one night stands and shotgun marriages rather than lasting unions. In these circumstances the transition of joined-up thinking into stitching up deals is all too evident.

It is still unusual, in practice, to find significant collaboration between organisations and agencies located for funding purposes in different sectors. So whilst it is likely that concerted action across different arms of the state sector, and in partnership with the voluntary sector, in the interests of neighbourhood renewal is desirable, because of different funding streams and related market forces the opportunities for co-operation are highly circumscribed.

In circumstances in which partnerships are developed, but where partners enjoy different amounts of status and power, it is rare, given the nature of competitive self-interest, to overcome the consequences of some contributors being more equal than others. In these circumstances, small voluntary organisations and community groups who may well be those closest to the communities they serve are likely to be least powerful, most precarious and most in danger of liaisons that are detrimental to their autonomy and best interests.

Stitched-up language

It is not simply that different organisations have their own agendas, which are usually self-interested and not always transparent, or that partnerships are over-determined by government control mechanisms, which contributes to stitched-up thinking. The pragmatic, taken-for-granted or uncritical use of language, without much recognition of the contested or ideological nature of its meaning, also serves to restrict rather than deepen understanding.

36 Judith Summers. *Squaring the Circle: Lifelong Learning Partnerships in England*, LlinE (Lifelong Learning in Europe) Volume 5, Issue 3: 2000

Social exclusion, for example, is widely used as a social concept. Social exclusion contributes to a discourse which both describes and covers a multitude of sins. It acts as a convenient euphemism for a number of conditions which are both politically and socially unpalatable. These are conditions such as structural inequality, absolute poverty and the divisions created by social class. They are conditions which are exacerbated by other unfashionable concerns such as oppression, discrimination, exploitation and racism.

Margaret Thatcher was never keen to talk about social class or discrimination, for example, in case it gave the working class ideas. New Labour has also been reluctant to associate itself with the language of class oppression because it upsets the private sector, it smacks of conflict and opposing interests, and is reminiscent of a political past that New Labour is keen to leave behind. Not mentioning class has not made it go away, of course.[37]

But social exclusion is a much less emotive term. It puts the focus on individuals and groups who are defined by their difference or 'otherness' when compared to mainstream/middle class society, rather than by their structural inequality or historic oppression. It invites behaviour modification rather than economic redistribution. It lends itself to interventions concerned to adjust, reform or reprimand those who do not appear to share the same norms and values as the rest of us (about good parenting, the benefits of learning, the work ethic and participating in civil society, for example) on the assumption that 'we' know best. It is a term which can be used to invoke criticism or invite compassion and is easily replaced by social inclusion to sound more positive when necessary. In recognising that some individuals actually exclude themselves, the rest of us can be reassured that society, the state and the economy are not responsible for the general condition of social exclusion. But we do recognise the need to combat it, if only because the alternative in terms of social unrest or social disintegration is more dangerous.

In these circumstances, the concept of social exclusion allows us to talk about individuals and groups of individuals such as the long-term unemployed, pregnant teenagers, disaffected youth, minority ethnic communities, people with disabilities, one-parent families, refugees, asylum seekers, homeless people, the dependent elderly, addicts, people with mental health problems and prisoners in terms of the stereotypes they inhabit and the problems they pose. It prevents us from worrying too much about what they have in common with each other, other than the fact that they seem to be concentrated in the country's poorest regions, run-down neighbourhoods and worst estates. To paraphrase a better known aphorism, there is now no such thing as social class, only individuals and groups of individuals who are socially excluded.

37 See, for example, Jane Thompson (2000) *Women Class and Education*, London: Routledge

In terms of policy interventions, the principle of tough love is regularly invoked. Free child-care for teenage mothers – so long as they stay at school – is one of the latest examples of this. If excluded individuals can be persuaded, even coerced, into climbing ladders and grasping opportunities by signing up now for education, re-training, turning their neighbourhoods around, they are less likely to face the consequences of getting sent home, sent down or sent up for behaviour that places them beyond the pale.

I am not arguing, of course, that we should be unwilling to tackle social exclusion but that we should start with some of the assumptions which influence the ways in which social exclusion is perceived. It is always much easier to blame the victims rather than change the system, after all. The focus on the deficiencies of individuals and minority groups, however well intentioned, distracts attention away from the structural, social, political and economic circumstances, and trends, which give rise to social inequalities and which are largely outside of the control of those who live in poor communities.

It glosses over the conspicuous evidence that members of more privileged groups also get pregnant, take drugs, commit crimes and behave irresponsibly in the privacy of family life. But because they are not poor, have more resources and power, and are not perceived to be a danger in terms of social unrest or social disintegration, their behaviour and activities are subject to less scrutiny and less state intervention. On the evidence of recent ESRC-funded research, involving interviews with 1,000 children and conducted by Jonathan Scales at Essex University, it was found that 'more middle-class children admit to having committed an act of vandalism in the past year than their less privileged contemporaries, and that considerably more claim to have consumed alcohol in the past month...instances of suspension from school, smoking and making friends with those who use illegal drugs are at a similar level across all backgrounds and classes'. According to Scales, his study 'is a wake-up call for those who buy into the huge middle-class assumption that yob culture is something that only working-class children indulge in'.[38]

Education on its own can't do much about changing social and structural inequalities. It can, however, legitimise and intensify them. We probably need rather less in the way of targeting[39] the socially excluded via short-term initiatives that serve institutional interests and rather more in the way of sustained alliances between education workers and local people. Alliances which should be built upon equality and respect and informed by the will to tackle issues together, in ways which involve shifting the balance of power between 'us and them', and by engaging critically with the politics of democratic renewal.

38 Amelia Hill, 'Better-off families breed Britain's new hooligans', *The Observer*, 25.2.01 p 7

39 I do hate this word when it is used about people. It reminds me of the 1960s 'war on poverty' version of current strategies, depicted in a Feiffer cartoon in a which a puzzled member of the urban poor asks, 'are they going to shoot us now?'

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8.2 The limitations of individualism and the idea of community

The liberal (and neo-liberal) preference for individualism, related to personal freedom, individual rights and free enterprise, rather than collectivism has a long history in western political thought. It was resurrected and promoted as a political, social and economic credo during the Thatcher years and was captured for posterity in that infamous Thatcherism which proclaimed 'there is no such thing as society, only individuals.'[40] Economic policies that were informed by monetarism and consumer capitalism, and matched by social policies concerned to reduce public spending and dismantle the institutional safety net provided by the state – in the interests of freeing and privatising market opportunities in the public sector – were not invented by successive Conservative governments. But they were relentlessly pursued, throughout 18 years in office, with enduring consequences, not only in relation to policies but also in relation to ideas and popular wisdom.

Freeing the individual from any loyalty to 'the mass' and from any memory of collective solidarity or mass action helped to diminish the possibilities of a concerted challenge to the status quo. The smaller (and weaker) the units into which people could be split, and the more their energies could be exercised in fighting or competing with their equally impotent neighbours, the smaller the chances would be that their act would ever be got together. Thus the promotion of individualism became both an imperative and a success story. Competition, choice and consumerism became its hallmarks.

As an ideology, individualism has suited the interests of those who do have choices, and who can compete effectively, because they have the resources of wealth, knowledge and power to enable them to do so. It has also attracted those who have felt constrained by their association with larger categories and groups, for example, assumptions about class that have made women's experiences invisible, and assumptions about women that have made black and minority experience invisible.

Because it has chimed in well with the shift from grand narratives such as race and class to cultural identities, it has proved to be highly compatible with the intellectual support for conservative interests within the academy in recent years. In the process of re-interpreting structural inequalities – which do not command current political approval – as 'cultural differences', oppression, racism, discrimination and deprivation have been re-cast as 'cultural variety', thus separating the bid for recognition (which characterises identity politics) from the activity of redistribution. This process has also helped to adjust popular wisdom to current economic realities. In education particularly, the new economic realities

40 What Margaret Thatcher actually said was 'there is no such thing as society, only the individual and his (sic) family'... but the point she was making is much the same!

related to globalisation and market capitalism have been largely surrendered to by the learning and skills agenda, and are only rarely challenged or contested.[41]

Individualism is also an ideology which works as an incentive to those who want to improve their living standards or aspire to better things by buying a house or getting a well paid job. It appeals to liberals who imagine that social changes can be achieved by persuasion and education rather than the structural re-distribution of wealth and other resources. It is a stick with which to beat those who fail to prosper or who 'choose' not to make the most of the opportunities available to them. It distracts attention away from generalisations that can be made about shared social inequalities and absences of power that are characteristic of poverty, class, race, gender, age and disability.

A major legacy of the Conservative years, therefore, has been to replace ideas of mutual solidarity, collectivism, common humanity and socialism in everyday life, by notions of personal enterprise and competitive individualism. This world-view has been effectively consolidated by New Labour but has also been modified by the language of meritocracy and opportunity.

Consistent with the desire of individuals for a better life, and the challenge by government to make the most of lifelong learning opportunities and social mobility irrespective of social background, we now find the familiar metaphor of the ladder re-instated as first-rung provision and progression routes. Despite the common enthusiasm for social change on an individualised basis, however, the material conditions of those living in poverty are much more intransigent than can be resolved by individual mobility. For those who are the poorest and most excluded, there are no ladders in sight. Ladders are for minorities. Majorities stay put. You can only climb ladders one at a time, one rung at a time. The capacity of individuals to climb at all depends on them not being more than a ladder-length away from their destination. And there is always downward mobility. The further the fall, the greater the grievance and demoralisation. Those who make it up the ladder and out of poverty do not materially change anything for those, the majority of their fellows, who are left behind. They may act as role models to the rest but they are just as likely – very likely in the present ideological climate – to be 'on their bikes' without a backward glance.

A life driven in this way by competitive individualism also implies a journey that is full of 'sound and fury'.[42] Although individualism signifies autonomy and freedom, in a world that is characterised by insecurity, conflict and uncertainty, making everyone individually

41 See, for example, Thompson, Shaw and Bane (eds) (2000) *Reclaiming Common Purpose* Leicester: NIACE; and Jane Thompson (ed) (2000) *Stretching the Academy: The Politics and Practice of Widening Participation in Higher Education*, Leicester: NIACE

42 Zygmunt Bauman (2001) *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, Cambridge: Polity

responsible for themselves, and for the future, is a risky business. For these reasons, and as a possible corrective to competitive individualism at the expense of mutual solidarity, the notion of community comes in very handy.

Community is a word which unlike area, neighbourhood, region or society has a tremendous feel-good factor associated with it. It is a word that does not simply have a meaning, it has a feel, and the feeling is invariably good. It is good to have a community, to be part of a community, especially if you are poor or you are a member of a least-powerful minority. Community is about feeling secure, understanding each other, sharing similar experiences and concerns, being on the same wavelength, not being a stranger, being able to count on each other, helping each other out – especially in dangerous and difficult times.

In other words, community stands for the kind of world which is rarely – if ever – available to us, a place we would dearly love to inhabit and which someday we might re-make. Raymond Williams once observed that the most remarkable thing about community is that it is always about what 'has been'. In these, less historically conscientious times, it is also in the future. Community nowadays is another name for paradise lost, but one to which we hope to return. That is why we eagerly seek out the roads – community development and community renewal, for example – that might take us there.[43]

More cynically, community is also a term that gets used to fabricate a more positive and attractive image than the one widely associated with sink estates, deprived neighbourhoods and ghettos, on those occasions when a feel-good factor is required. In sink estates, deprived neighbourhoods and ghettos 'sharing stigma and public humiliation does not make the sufferers into brothers; it feeds mutual derision, contempt and hatred'.[44] For this reason, it is deprived neighbourhoods that have to be turned around and renewed, and it is community champions and community entrepreneurs, in their individual capacities, of course, who will be encouraged to lead the way.

8.3 Reclaiming social purpose

Reclaiming social purpose in lifelong learning is part of the radical tradition in adult education that links education to the unfulfilled desires of ordinary people to change the circumstances of their lives. According to this view an important purpose of education is about improving and changing the terms and conditions of people's lives, not simply on an individual basis but

43 *ibid*
44 *ibid*

together with others who share similar unsatisfactory circumstances. It is about creating the conditions for a socially just and democratically confident society in the interests of the common good. It is a tradition which believes that both education and democratic involvement in social change are political, and that education should resource the struggle of people to challenge democracy's limitations and to extend its possibilities. Viewed from this perspective, neighbourhood renewal is not about bricks and mortar or crowd control. It is not simply a new market for the provision of lifelong learning. It is principally about issues of democracy, about active citizenship defined as people being more in control of their own lives whilst also committed to the vision of a socially just and socially inclusive society.

In terms of its social purpose, lifelong learning for neighbourhood renewal could become a critical resource to local people in ways that help to build self-confidence and activism; that add new and relevant knowledge to what people already know from their own experience; that support informal learning with access to ideas and skills that increase political and social understanding; and that connect people's lived experience to the bigger picture in which their struggles are situated. Defined in this way, the role of lifelong learning is to resource the activities and actions which people then take, and the use which they then make, of the learning they undertake. It is a process which relates learning to doing, which connects experience to ideas and understanding, and which draws on both experience and knowledge to inform activity and action. Conceived in this way learners and residents are social actors and activists in their own lives, rather than targets, empty vessels, prospective course consumers or clients in search of cures. They are placed at the heart of what is happening, in control of what is relevant, the subjects rather than the objects of educational and policy interventions, actively and collectively shaping their own personal, social and economic lives.

If educational policy makers, providers and practitioners are to be able to rise to the challenge of providing resources for people in their struggle to change the circumstances of their lives, in the places where they live, they will need to re-learn and make into a new kind of reality the old adult education ideal of starting from where people are, in ways that are not devoid of context, and which pay tribute to the diversity and complexity of people's lives. They will need to come off their platforms, out of their offices and from behind their procedures into creative spaces in which dialogue and connection can be established and sustained. They must come prepared to listen and respond; to learn and try to understand; to get stuck in, and to stay.

It is not surprising that those who live in the worst neighbourhoods are amongst the least well educated, the least well informed and are the least susceptible to educational overtures from earnest professionals, however well intentioned. Although lifelong learning on its own cannot change lives and neighbourhoods in which the consequences of economic, racial and class systems still create huge differences in wealth and access to resources, including

access to real jobs, information and democratic participation, it does have a part to play in anticipating a more egalitarian society.

It can help people to make sense of their various struggles against poverty and unemployment, racialism, crime, bad housing, drugs, violence and social injustices. It can help people to create and generate the kinds of 'really useful knowledge'[45] that raises awareness, that develops critical intelligence and useful skills, and which informs more effective participation in civil society. It can support the determination of those like my grandfather whose rallying cry was 'To hell with poverty!' and whose solution was collective action. Most critically, it can address issues of difference and conflict. Because, as I learned for myself from women in Derry, whilst the poor are fighting with each other, the rich are laughing.

For all of these reasons, lifelong learning will be most purposeful when it is related to the ordinary concerns of everyday life, and is not seen as something that other people do, or which is irrelevant. It will be most engaging when it captures the imagination, encourages emotional involvement and provides for the satisfaction of unfulfilled desires. It will be most sustained when it gets results in the form of palpable personal, social and political changes.

The challenge facing lifelong learning practitioners therefore is to establish a committed dialogue with the residents of deprived neighbourhoods, in order to develop the kinds of educational resourcing that makes sense to them, and which can begin to make a difference to their lives. These initiatives will be most effective when they take place in locally based settings and in contexts that are easily accessible and unpretentious. The extent to which more formal provision might then be offered will depend upon the quality and relevance of earlier informal and non-formal learning experiences. It will also depend upon the willingness of government, funding bodies, and various providers to rethink the cost, the culture and the context of what they have to offer non-traditional learners.

There is plenty of belief among professionals that, on an individual basis, education can help people to change their lives. But changing the lives of whole communities of people, living in the worst possible circumstances, is something which requires a different kind of educational imagination and a different quality of commitment. The biggest contribution lifelong learning can make to neighbourhood renewal is to find ways of relating learning to collective engagement in common concerns, in sustainable ways that help to repair damaged solidarities and which collaborate in building new ones.

45 Richard Johnson (1979) 'Really Useful Knowledge: education and working class culture' in Clarke, Critcher and Johnson (eds) *Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory*, London: Hutchinson .

8.4 People before systems

The commitment to community involvement is one of the big ideas in the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. Based on the PAT reports that produced it, the National Strategy has recognised the limitations of top-down interventions in strategies to reduce poverty, and has been persuaded by the overwhelming evidence of cynicism and disengagement in deprived neighbourhoods, created by the parachuting in and out of projects and experts on a piecemeal basis, to seek other solutions. What is different about this Government's approach is the alleged determination to include local people 'in active involvement' and 'in the driving seat' when it comes to 'turning around' their neighbourhoods 'in whatever ways they want'.[46]

The rhetoric suggests a radical and committed approach, which offers opportunities to get involved and resources, in terms of training and cash, to be able to do so. In the Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), assembled to deliver neighbourhood renewal, residents are expected to be involved in 'sufficient numbers' to have an impact, with the threat of government intervention if LSPs do not fulfil their brief to 'actively seek out' their involvement or 'respond appropriately' to what they have to say.[47]

However, the means by which this energetic rhetoric is to be made a reality is somewhat problematic. Although the intention implies community engagement of a serious order, the practice focuses more on management than on participation and more on formal representation than on direct practical involvement. Concerns expressed about 'yet more structures' and 'too much bureaucracy' which have dogged Learning and Skills Councils and Learning Partnerships appear to be synonymous with government notions of devolving power and responsibility at local level. Neighbourhood renewal seems set for yet another re-invention of change by committee. Whilst I do not doubt the sincerity of the intention to shift some of the power, or to welcome the active involvement of local people in proposals they can own and control, these aspirations are in danger of being stifled by the institutional forms upon which they rely.

Money for neighbourhood renewal is in the hands of local authorities. Community involvement relies upon residents' representation on LSPs and upon targeted funding administered by regional Government Offices. This approach is based on management and representation which relies on forms of organisation that have proved ineffective in other contexts, for example in political parties and trades unions, and in voting patterns in local and national elections. It is unlikely that structures and systems modelled on the

46 National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal: Action Plan 2001
47 *ibid.*

organisational preferences of professional politicians and institutional practices will revitalise local democratic engagement in any significant way. And whilst earnest capacity builders might set about delivering accredited courses in committee skills and filling in funding forms, my guess is that the prospect of any eagerness or flourishing in relation to such activity will be hard to come by.

Part of New Labour's difficulty in converting some of its aspirations and rhetoric into reality is its reluctance to hand over control without pre-determining the terms and conditions by which that control will be managed. Of course the Government of the day is responsible for the proper use of public funds and the pressure to be seen to produce appropriate outcomes is enormous. But there is a basic contradiction in an approach which claims to offer innovatory and power-shifting opportunities (delivered with more than a little moral hectoring about 'individual responsibility' and the 'duties' of poor people to 'make the most' of the chances they are being given[48]) but which then relies on replicating institutional arrangements that minimise the power and the presence of ordinary people, instead of developing and building up a culture of active engagement. Neither is there much evidence that local politicians and local public sector workers are any more likely than national professional groups to welcome the advance of people power or the kinds of arrangements that would make local community involvement real and effective.

The danger is that further alienation will be the consequence. People have already grown tired of more of the same methods of community consultation – mapping and scoping exercises, surveys and needs analyses, focus groups and forums – all of which consistently fail to engage the interests and commitments of more than a few local people. All of which usually fail to effect real changes in their lives.

The notion of mentors, champions and leaders also misses the point. Representation and leadership is a complicated business. Self-appointed spokesmen and role models, as well as those with traditional, cultural or religious authority, do not necessarily reflect or serve the interests of those they claim to represent. The exercise of power, based on age, race or gender, for example within and between different groups in neighbourhoods, can be as oppressive and exclusive as the wider power relationships that keep them in competition with each other for scarce resources. With local politicians, local public sector workers and local leaders all placed in the potential position of gatekeepers, government-devised systems which institutionalise their influence, at the expense of a culture of collective activism and active participation, might look neater in relation to accountability and risk management, but will not shift the balance of power or give people more control over their own lives in the poorest of neighbourhoods. Out of the frustration and the gridlock which such systems

48 Tony Blair 8 February 2001

create comes increased apathy or people taking matters into their own hands in ways that are not always in their best interests.

In these circumstances lifelong learning can make a contribution, especially if it is informed by and committed to the social purpose and community development traditions in adult and community education. Participatory research methods, participatory appraisals, campaigns and community events, informal learning in social action and cultural action are all examples of engaging local democratic activity in ways that are based on participation, networking and mutual learning, rather than traditional representation. Community development and outreach workers, animateurs and cultural workers, who take their lead from local people, who offer their skills in response to the issues identified by local people, who work in solidarity with local people and who are happy to hand over power and control to local people, can become serious allies in supporting community activity.

This is learning which builds on what people do without reference to educational or other institutions and which derives from the social dynamics of their lives. It includes the learning from experience that occurs within the cut and thrust of everyday life. But it is also learning which includes the intricate attachments of informal and non-formal affiliations and associations, as well as more organised support groups, clubs, action groups, community groups and communities of interest, whereby people give meaning and significance to shared experiences and common understandings with others and through which they act upon their world.

It is a model of education that does not see learning simply in terms of creating more customers for formal courses in established institutions, but as a way of resourcing democratic engagement and supporting local people to challenge the limitations and to extend the possibilities of democratic activity. It involves re-distributing the power of education and the control over what counts as useful and relevant knowledge, to people rather than systems. It means doing this more widely in communities than would be the case if ladders and credits and costs were the system of organisation. As such, it represents an implicit threat to the authority of experts and institutional self-interests. But in the longer term it offers rewards to more people, and collectively to more communities, than would otherwise be the case.

9 Questions for discussion

Please think about the following questions in the light of what you have read in this discussion paper. You may want to use these questions as the basis for further discussion with your colleagues and with the learners, activists and residents with whom you work.

1 How can lifelong learning help to contribute to a culture of active engagement that puts people before systems?

2 How can lifelong learning help to strengthen collective learning to support neighbourhood renewal in a policy ethos that is obsessed with individual progression?

3 How can we change the institutional cultures and practices which encourage providers and practitioners to view neighbourhood renewal as another means of getting funding, or as a performance target or a market for educational commodities rather than as a principled and sustained engagement?

4 How do we ensure that enough time is allowed for this work in a culture greedy for narrow outcomes and numerical indicators?

5 What lessons do providers need to learn about democratic pedagogy and curriculum development in relation to neighbourhood renewal?

6 Who do we mean by 'the practitioners' in this context?

7 What staff development, skills and knowledge do practitioners need to ensure they have as good an understanding as possible of the issues and concerns that are important to local people in their neighbourhood in order to be 'really useful'?

8 What staff development, knowledge and skills do practitioners need to prepare them for anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, especially in relation to class, age, gender, ethnicity and race?

9 How can we build the capacity of practitioners working across conflict and tensions in neighbourhoods seeking renewal?

10 What are the common and different issues facing practitioners working with women, 'excluded men', minority ethnic communities, older residents, young people in deprived neighbourhoods? What kinds of staff development would be useful?

11 How shall we address the reluctance of those who manage services, systems and structures at local level to hand over some of their power to local people?

This policy discussion paper is about the relationship between lifelong learning, active citizenship and neighbourhood renewal. The Government has declared its intention to involve local people actively in the Herculean task of turning round their devastated and deprived communities. In the process this represents one of the best chances we have to put some of the ambitious aspirations of lifelong learning into practice. But are we up to the challenge? Do we know what to do? Are we ready to get serious about active-citizenship and social inclusion? It has been a long time since community education providers and practitioners have been asked to think about, speak about and act as though learning is connected to the wider purpose of social change, involving social action and political engagement. This paper encourages them to do so.

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